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THE SPECULATIVE VALUE OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION (HIEROLOGY).

By MERWIN-MARIE SNELL.

THE science of comparative religion, or hierology, is divisible into two parts, the morphology and the history of religions. Morphology is the science of form; in the morphological study of religious facts they are considered in themselves without any regard to the element of time, which in the historical study of them receives the chief attention. Take, for instance, the practice of sacrifice; religious morphology describes the details of the rite, while religious history follows the development of the sacrificial idea in its various forms of votive gift, burnt offering, human sacrifice, etc., ascertaining the origin of each variation, and of the central notion itself. Or suppose that there is question of the mechanical devices used in prayer; religious morphology would describe the rosaries of the Mohammedans and Catholics and Buddhists, and the methods of using them; the praying wheels and flags and mills and walls of the Chinese; and the *barçom*, or bundle of consecrated twigs used by the Parsees in their devotions. Religious history would try to discover whether or not the prayer beads of the different religions had a common origin, and might perhaps find their germ in some simple mnemonic system, such as the *quipa*, or knotted cords, of the Peruvians. It might discover that prayer flags began with the strips of cloth hung upon the trees at the rural spirit shrines, and that the first step toward the prayer wheel and the "praying" wall and mill was the placing of religious mottoes upon useful utensils and machinery.

It will be easily seen that these two forms of the study of religions cannot be considered as distinct branches of the science, for neither of them can be treated to the exclusion of the other. A series of morphological studies, arranged in

chronological order, would constitute a historical record, or at least furnish the materials for one; while an ethnic or geographical series of historical facts would be a study in the religious morphology of the race or region. To recur to the example before given, a successive description of the rough pebbles used by the Tartar shaman in his incantations, the twigs held by the Parsee at prayer, the string of unassorted beads used by the Buddhist friar or the Norse saga man, and the complicated rosary devotion of the modern Catholic, would at once appear to be a history of the development of the rosary; while a paper describing the historical facts regarding the use of the *barçom* twigs by the ancient Parsee or Mazdean, together with his veneration of the elements, his worship of the *homa* plant, his purificatory rites, his fear of the Evil One, and his adoration of the Great Spirit, would be nothing more nor less than an essay on the morphology of the Mazdeism of that epoch to which the account referred.

But the morphological and historical aspects of religions have very different kinds of significance to the thinking student. The value of religious morphology is above all theological, while the principal worth of religious history is philosophical, in the wider sense of that word.

The morphological study of religions ministers to theology by showing the relative excellence of the religious systems of the world. It determines in a direct manner their relative scientific position by applying to them the laws which hold good in all kinds of organic integration. For example, it is a law of biology that the higher an organism the greater its organic unity. Many of the lowest forms of animal life, or protozoa, can be cut into innumerable pieces without affecting their vitality, each portion becoming a complete animal. As we go higher we find a gradually increasing unification, so that, while in lower forms there are several nervous centers, and even a number of bodily segments of about the same size and importance as the brain and head, we find in man a completely dominant brain, and the most perfect individuality. If the same law be applied to religions in their doctrinal aspect, we find that the Christian

system, which has its center and justification and very essence in the single personality of Jesus Christ, is, whether true or false, scientifically superior to any other system in which several divinities, or men, like the segments of the centipede, hold an approximately equal place.

The morphology of religions cannot itself make any comparison of them according to their degree of spirituality, or veracity, or practical efficiency; but it furnishes materials for such a comparison. When the self-centered asceticism of the *bhikshu*, or Buddhist friar, is described side by side with the *bhakti*, or emotional faith or trust of the Vishnuite Krishna worshippers, with its five stages of peace, service, friendship, filial affection, and fond attachment to deity, the latter is at once seen to be the more spiritual. When the sober narratives of the Chinese classics are compared with the extravagances of the *Saddhârma Pandarika*, or "Lotus of the Good Law" (one of the best-known Buddhist books of the Nepâlese canon), the former commend themselves at once to the historical sense by their far greater verisimilitude. When the Vedantist doctrine that the whole universe, including every human being, is a part of Brahma, and that the true aim of every man should be to free himself from the illusion that he has any separate existence, is compared with the Mazdean and Christian teaching of an eternity of punishment for the wrongdoer, and an everlasting blessedness, which may begin even upon this earth, through an eternally conscious communion with deity, it becomes evident in a moment that the latter will be most efficient, both as a moral incentive and deterrent, as a strength and solace in the midst of the sorrows inseparable from human existence, and as a nourishment to that spiritual sense which is of the very essence of every human soul.

It was said at the outset that while the value of the morphology of religions is chiefly theological, that of their historical study is before all philosophical. But the word "philosophical" is not to be used in the sense of "metaphysical." By the term "philosophy," in such a connection as this, is meant the study of the ideas, principles, or laws which bind facts together, and

by which alone they can be adequately interpreted. Every group of facts, however trivial, may be philosophically studied. It is characteristic of what may be called the new education to as far as possible teach and study facts always in relation to the ideas which lie behind them. In former days it was considered enough to store the mind with vast numbers of isolated data, as one would stock a lumber yard; but now it is seen that facts are comparatively worthless until built up into a living structure of thought, and that few minds are strong enough, at any rate in their early stages, to assimilate entirely inorganic materials, any more than our stomachs could utilize the chemical constituents of the soil until they had been organized for use in the plant and the animal. Hence it is that history is coming to be subordinated to the philosophy of history. From a dry chronicle of dynastic changes, wars, treaties, and public works, history is becoming the drama of progress, a vivid portrayal and explanation of the thoughts and sentiments and life and environment of peoples in all their changing phases.

It is the philosophy of history which alone gives real significance to its records, and the key to the philosophy of history is the history of religions. What would be the value of a philosophical discussion of the history of the Hebrew people which did not dwell first and foremost upon its religious history? And the histories of Egypt, of Chaldea, of Persia, of India, of China, of Christian Europe, of pre-Columbian Mexico, and in fact of all the nations of antiquity and most of those which exist to our day, are equally bound up with their religions. Some difference of opinion exists as to the degree in which intellectual and material development is dependent upon religious beliefs. It is my personal conviction that religion is the determining factor in the fate of nations as well as of individuals. It is only the history of religions which is competent to settle this question. But no one can deny that in the most ancient times of which any record remains to us religion was closely involved in all individual thought and life, and entered into the very structure of the body politic. Kings ruled as the representatives of their patron deities, and in many places pow-

erful priesthoods held most of the civil as well as religious power. A large proportion of the inhabitants of the world are to this day ruled by their sorcerers, priests, medicine men, or other religious leaders. Consequently no philosophy of social or political history could be complete which did not take into account the all-important factor of religion.

The science of ethnology, too, depends upon the history of religions for many facts which are essential to a true interpretation of the disintegration and fusion of populations and a proper understanding of their several customs and characters. It was religion that brought out the great progenitor of Israel from Chaldea and made him "a father of many nations;" it was religion that divided India against itself and left it an easy prey to the western invaders; it is religion that has so long soldered together the diverse populations of the Celestial Empire; it was religion which united the Semitic tribes into a world-threatening power; it is religion which has given a moral unity to Europe and produced that foremost civilization which is known to all the world as Christian.

The dependence of popular customs upon religious notions is well known. Even our children's games are, many of them, survivals of religious ceremonies. The daily life of the individual, the adjustments of domestic relations, and the very details of food, drink, clothing, washing, exercise, and labor have always been largely, if not wholly, determined by religious considerations.

The Mazdean and the Jew and the Buddhist were only allowed to eat certain food at certain times and in a certain way; the Hindu and the Moslem and the Catholic have their own peculiar days and periods of fasting and abstinence; the Buddhist and Christian friars, the clergy of many religions, and all the adherents of some, were required to wear certain prescribed clothing; the Jew, the Parsee, the Brahmin, and the Catholic wear various badges of devotion upon their persons, such as phylacteries, sacred cords, scapulars, and medals; the Jew and the Moslem are required by their religion to wash upon frequent occasions; Judaism and Christianity prescribe periodic

abstention from manual labor; and these illustrations might be indefinitely multiplied.

When we pass from the individual and collective life of the people to the products of their thought and fancy and manual dexterity, we still find religion as their chief inspiration. Witness the architectural monuments of antiquity. In the valleys of Siberia and the jungles of Hindustân are the ruined temples of forgotten creeds; in Egypt and Chaldea may be seen the fanes in which were worshiped the gods of paganism, and perhaps the very God of the patriarchs and of all humanity, thousands of years before the Christian era; in the mountains of India, on the fields of Britain, beneath the accumulated débris of successive civilizations in Greece and Italy and Asia Minor—everywhere and always the temple, the shrine, the sacred image.

At first sculpture and painting were consecrated to the service of the gods. Just as painting and sculpture and decorative art are the children of architecture, so likewise music and poetry and tragedy and comedy and melodrama and eloquence seem to have been the outgrowth of the ceremonial dance, which at first was probably an instinctive expression of adoring joy. In classical antiquity this group of euphonic arts originated in the dithyrambus, or choral hymn, in honor of the god Dionysus. In Christendom likewise they first made their appearance for the most part as accessories to worship or media of religious instruction.

Not only the life and art, but the literature and philosophy of the world have been from time immemorial the handmaids of religion. All the most ancient literary remains are full of the religious spirit, and most of them have a distinctively sacred character. Such, in ancient Chaldea, were the inscriptions of Telloh (written between 3500 and 4500 B. C.), the Legend of the Creation (the earliest rendition of which thus far discovered dates from about 2500 B. C.), and the Descent of Ishtar into Hades (probably of equal antiquity); such, in Egypt, the Precepts of Ptah-hotep (about 4000 B. C.), and the Book of the Dead (before 3000 B. C.); in India the Rig Veda Mantra; in Persia the Yasna Gâthas (both of these supposed by many to

have been composed in great part before 1500 B. C.), and in Syria the early books of the Hebrew Bible.

While secular art and literature appear to have always originated from their religious counterparts, philosophy was certainly in its early stages identical with theology. Philosophy and theology grew up together, by a process of analysis, classification, and deductive reasoning, out of the uncorrelated and, as it were, floating ideas, highly religious in their collective coloring, of which men were at first possessed, and became more and more distinct as the analytic process advanced. It is not possible for them to be entirely separated without the more or less complete suppression of one or the other ; and an adequate history of the intellectual side of religions would be almost identical with the history of philosophy.

The close relation thus pointed out between religion on the one hand and social organization and customs, art, literature, and philosophy on the other shows the vast importance of the study of religions, not only as an indispensable means to the proper understanding of the history and relations of these things, but also as the most profound and important of all psychological investigations, and the only key to the problem of human evolution.

Perhaps the most burning question of anthropological science is this : whether the mental, moral, and spiritual faculties of man, as they now exist, are the result of a gradual development out of a primitive state of pure animality, or simply of an unfolding and exercise of faculties already possessed in a high degree of power by the first members of the human race. Closely connected with this is the theory, to which I have already referred, that all human progress is directly proportionate to the degree of union of the human will with the divine. According to this hypothesis, even though there be a process of cosmic evolution as the product of the divine creative activity, any intelligent creature who permits himself to diverge, in even the slightest degree, from the truth and law of God just so far fails to receive and transmit the onward and upward impulse. So the current of human progress is always strongest where the

divine light is brightest ; and nations sink into barbarism just in proportion as they fall away from true religion. This theory, which, if true, will be a generalization of the greatest value for the proper understanding of the vicissitudes of civilization and culture, can only be tested by the instrumentality of the history of religions, a fact which in itself should be sufficient to make us realize the fundamental importance of that study.

After this review of what may be called the theoretical utility of hierological science, it must be added by way of reservation that this science is still so young and undeveloped that no one is justified in speaking authoritatively in its name upon the greater problems upon which it can be brought to bear. But with these fascinating and important problems confronting us, and knowing that their final answer is in the keeping of this inchoate science, with what eagerness will we thrust ourselves into it, in the hope that even amid the confusion of its yet fragmentary and unclassified materials it may be our lot to catch at least some prophetic glimpse of the desired solutions!